
Not Safe, but True

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 14 July 2024

Amos 7:7-9 • Ephesians 1:3-14 • Mark 6:14-29



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

This sad and rather gruesome story about Herod beheading John the Baptist comes as a bit of a shock. Reading Mark's Gospel, we have been learning about Jesus, how John prepared the way for him to come, how he called the first disciples, how he began to heal people with various diseases. The story so far is one of miracles and the gathering momentum of Jesus' mission. People are joining him, learning, being healed, coming out of their usual day-to-day lives to crowd around him and many to begin to follow him.

And then the focus shifts temporarily, from Jesus back to John. John was the first person we encountered in Mark's Gospel story, and although we quickly

learn that he is not the hero of the story, still, he's an important character, our hero's cousin and childhood friend.

And then we hear that Herod has his head cut off.

It's a bit shocking, and it brings us up. This is no longer a pretty story about a gentle man who goes about the countryside bringing health and comfort to all the people. Suddenly the story gets real. This is real life in an occupied country, and bad things do happen when authority is challenged. For, as we are told, King Herod has heard about Jesus, because everyone is talking about him, and the stories reach Herod's ears. The killing of John has already happened, and Herod's first thought is that the man he hears about is John, raised from the dead (Mark 6:16), because that story has been going around. The gossip around town is that Jesus must be the return of Elijah, or of John.

Mark then tells us how John's death came about. It is a shameful story. Herod has married his brother Philip's wife. It is unclear if Philip is dead or not; Herod may have just taken Herodias away from him because he lusted after her. Herodias had a very attractive daughter, and one night, during a drunken men-only party, Herod calls for her to dance for him and the men, and she pleases him so much that he promises to grant any request. Egged on by her mother, the girl asks for John's head. Herod is too weak to refuse, and sends the executioner to John's cell to carry out the command.

Could there be any set of events more in opposition to the Gospel Jesus is preaching? Unlawfulness, drunkenness, infidelity, coveting another's wife, murder — this story has it all, and Herod is guilty of all. If you wondered whether God had a good reason to send Jesus to save the world from its sins, you need look no further. Herod becomes a type of the sinfulness of the whole world. The story strikes close to home for Jesus personally, as it is his cousin John who suffers from Herod's sins.

This story is unique in the Gospel. Other stories of sinful behaviour are told in parables, but this story is true, and it actually happened. It also functions in a way as a parable, and a prefiguration of Jesus' own execution. Consider:

- Both John and Jesus are from the same family.
- Both John and Jesus are wandering rabbis, with disciples following them.
- Both are executed, directly or indirectly, by Herod.
- Both are denounced by members of the ruling class: John by Herodias, the king's wife, and Jesus by the Pharisees, who held authority over the Jews.
- Both Jesus and John might have been saved, if an authority figure had been stronger to resist calls for their deaths: Pilate for Jesus and Herod for John. Herod actually enjoyed talking to John, and was fascinated by him; and

Pilate didn't really want to kill Jesus. Neither ruler could resist outside pressure.

- Both men's deaths could thus be considered almost accidental: they would have survived if events took a slightly different turn. But both die to serve God's purposes.

This story also reminds us of the relative worth of earthly kings. When Jesus is brought before Pilate and examined, the question arises as to whether he is king of the Jews. This matters to Pilate, because anyone calling himself a king challenges Pilate's authority. Jesus is a king, and his authority is far higher than any human king's. John has been called by Jesus the greatest among those born of women (Luke 7:28). Both suffer and die at the hands of earthly kings, but neither remains dead, for they rise again in glory.

Finally, this story serves as a reminder that the way of Jesus is not always easy. We as Christians pledge ourselves to follow Jesus, through good and ill. We read in the news about persecution of Christians in various lands. It happened two thousand years ago and it happens today. John's fate would have had a sobering effect on Jesus' disciples (not to mention John's). What they were doing in following Jesus might not be safe for them. They too might come to violent ends, and of course a number of them did. When John's disciples came to retrieve John's body from prison, their sorrow and shock would have been great, and not a few of them might have reconsidered their devotion to John's teaching. Jesus' own disciples also went to get his body; Joseph of Arimathea carried it to his own tomb for burial. Remarkably, although they gathered in fear over the next day or two, the other disciples remained faithful, and we know that they went on to spread the Gospel far and wide, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Following Jesus is not always safe; the Gospel is not a guarantee of a smooth and pleasant life — but it is the truth. Thanks be to God.